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David

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I am in love with David, in a temporal way, and he is going to die. Although it is a matter of choice rather than necessity, I am not resigned—but David does not listen. I will never be resigned. and he will never hear. The end is inescapable. but just now as I am telling you these things, we are all suspended in the waning summer of 1968 like insects caught in amber; time does not move; September is never going to come; David will never go.

David is tall and taut and strung-out; he moves with the latent violence, but little of the grace, of a caged cat, restless, ruthless, untouchable, and infinitely miserable. He is the blondest person I have ever seen; even at eighteen his hair remains the dazzling metallic shade usually found only on little children. I tease him by saying that when he blushes, and he is always blushing, his hair turns pink. And once at Disneyland he was walking alone in the sun, with his hair blazing white-hot color around his head, and a girl came up and asked him if she could touch it. David tells me about all his girls (and them about me, I suppose) as he perches on a chair in my kitchen, smoking rapidly and clumsily, drinking strong black tea, and I pour it out and listen and watch. Sometimes he is unearthly beautiful. He is working outdoors this summer, so when he comes to see me he is nearly always sunburned and dirty, dressed in a blue denim work shirt made limp by sweat over the tenseness of his body, and frayed jeans tied at the waist with a flourish of twine; his feet are bare and his hair grows long, for he is acting a part.

He is acting a part; he is Hamlet and Huckleberry Finn and Lucifer flaming on his way to hell, and I can often almost see and almost hear his attendant demons. They hide in his laugh, peering through the chipped teeth of his somehow precarious smile; he drank a fifth of Scotch one wild night and broke the teeth as he fell, he thinks. He is not sure, for he was out a long time. "Wow, was I smashed," he likes to say, but being stoned is better, as there are no aftereffects, except for the recurring flashes caused by acid. David has tried everything except for heroin, he says, and I believe it, aching with such fear and tenderness for him that the pain is physical, and I twist my hands together in an ancient, involuntary grief gesture, to keep from crying out, "Oh, God, David, why?"

It's fun, he says, it feels good, escaping. Escaping what? Does it matter? He looks down at me, and his ice-blue eyes glitter in his scorched face. I don't know why I should care; I don't know why he should not.

I met him at a country club at the beginning of July. I was a guest; he was a gardener, just coming off work in the middle of that very hot morning. I was standing on the edge of the swimming pool and staring up at the unclouded sky, which looked as hard and brittle as a blue glass bowl. Until the rains came the golf greens had to be watered through the night, and David worked from ten to ten. I cannot remember how or why we started to talk, but I do remember that he said, "This is a good job if I have to have one. They don't care what I do, really. And I like dark. I like being alone." He looked at the shrieking swimmers. "God, I hate this club. What are you doing here?"

I thought and couldn't find a reason. "Waiting for college to start, I guess," I said, finally. I pushed my wet hair out of my eyes, and then had to squint against the glare. A sunburn was starting on my shoulders. He said nothing.

"Are you going to school in the fall?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I'm joining the Marines."

He goes to boot camp at a place near San Diego on October first. His father is a math professor, and David has always been very bright; he had a large scholarship to a good college, but he has turned it down and enlisted. "I don't want to go to college right now," he says. And laughs, "Besides, I can't do math anymore. Grass and numbers just don't go."

He will volunteer for the demolition squad. The mortality rate is eighty percent. He shrugs. But he is so noncommittal and obdurate about it that I know it frightens him. He craves destruction; he flings himself away fiercely—yet not absolutely willingly. On the evening of the day that I met him, before he went to work, he came by my house; I don't know how he discovered where I live. But he offered to take me out and buy me an ice cream cone, and I agreed; the night folded around us like a black wool blanket; we drove in silence. Then he stopped the car by the side of the deserted road and said, "I don't want to be seen with you in Baskin-Robbins," and he flung an arm across the seat toward me. "And I haven't had a girl near me in so long. Too smashed. Come here—"

I was angry, and I jerked away.

"Well, I'm pretty naïve," I told him. "I think I want to go home."

He sat still for a moment, and his face was lost in the dark.

"I'm not very naïve," he said finally, amused. He turned the car around. "Would you hand me those cigarettes, please?"

There were a battered back of Winstons and a booklet of matches wedged in the crevice of the seat. After he had lighted the cigarette and the car began to fill with smoke, I found myself idly striking the remaining matches one by one. David said nothing until we arrived at my house. Then he threw the stub of his cigarette out the window, reached for another, and asked. "Are all the matches gone?"

"Yes," I said. I opened the door and got out.

"God damn you," he said, ran after me, caught me, and made a more than violent, almost savage pass at me. It was something I had never faced before, and I was very briefly afraid, fighting back; I would not become an object of his unhappiness, although the dark secret stirrings of my blood were bewildering my brain, and I desired with opposing halves of me both to yield to the hard arms and mouth, and to take his head between my hands and say, "My dear, my dear, it is not so dreadful here—stop and breathe and let me care for you." But I did neither, for he stopped, and said that sometimes it just didn't work, did it, and I looked at him, unexpected tears stinging in my eyes, and did not reply, but reached up and cupped his bristly cheek in my hand, and kissed him, and went inside. I thought he would never come back, but the next day there was a package for me: brown paper confined with ravelling twine, and inside, a present and a note, in David's enormous geometric handwriting. To A Vestal Virgin From A (Repentant) Satyr. The present was a set of handmade pan-pipes, fashioned of bamboo and string and pitch, and he has taught me to blow a song on them by now, for he has come back.

He is always hungry. I feed him whatever there happens to be most of in the house—gingerbread, soup, pickles, tea. He will not drink coffee, but once he discovered homemade yogurt in the back of the refrigerator and devoured it as systematically as everything else, explaining that his Finnish grandmother always used to make a food very like it. My mother always comes in to say hello to him; she is torn between horror and pity for him, and the result is a sort of morbid fascination. Also, he usually has brought something interesting to show us—a 200-year-old English gun from his collection, a tarantula he has captured on the golf course, or the guitar he is making for himself during the fragments of days and nights when he is free. He bends his head over each offering with the same intense interest; oblivious to the strands of long hair falling across his eyes, he explains that the gun is a matchlock, not a flintlock, and here is the maker's mark. As he disassembles the weapon I notice how his rough hands tremble. And they tremble as he traces the curves of the half-finished guitar. He does not try to touch me after the first night.

But he keeps coming back. He fills the ashtrays, lighting each cigarette from the butt of the one before. One day I noticed how oddly he was holding them, pinching the tip of the cigarette between his broken fingernails and smoking it to the very end, and I laughed at him. "Habit," he said. It took me a while to realize what he meant.

"I have half a key coming across the border this weekend," he told me, then grinned at the look on my face. "Do you know what that means?"

"Half a kilo," I said.

"Good girl," he said. "You know, if I wanted to corrupt you, I'd take you to a drive-in and close all the windows, and I'd smoke till we both blew our minds. That's what I did with Jill."

I looked down at the still-smouldering contents of the ashtray. Poor Jill!

"But I have my own highs," I said. "I'm just delirious all by myself."

"I—couldn't corrupt you." He leaned back and blew three smoke rings into the breathless afternoon; they drifted slowly, inevitably upward until they had dissolved into the thunderclouds burgeoning in the western sky.

"You'd be such a great guide... for when I'm stoned," said David.

Suddenly he rose, gave me one of his flawed smiles, and left, carrying the guitar as carefully as a live creature. "I've only got till October to get it finished," he remarked.

After he had gone, my mother came and looked at me anxiously.

"There's something Bohemian about that boy."

"Yes, Mother," I said.

"With people like that—oh, dear, you want to save them, but it's just too dangerous and there's no use. You just have to stay away—"

"No," I said softly.

She did not forbid me to see him; presently she went away. I wandered outside, where the clouds were invading the sky. The light thickened, and the sun fled, and a hot wind breathed through the desert. The trees' dry branches grated against one another unbearably; I heard one cricket cry. Both the land and I were filled with yearning for the storm, but nonetheless we dreaded the shock of it, as one fears the onset of a great spasm of tears. When the dust-devils began to whirl around me, prickling my skin with flying sand, I turned and went inside the house.

The storm was still holding off when David called at eight o'clock.

"I need ebony," he said, "for my guitar. And I know a little Dutch violin maker who has it, and I'm going to get some tonight. I'll pick you up in ten minutes and have you back in an hour, all right?"

"All right," I said.

My mother frowned. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"I don't really know," I said, and then, mollifying, I added, "It's only an hour."

David arrived, barefoot, his clean hair almost incandescent around his head and his long body uneasy in freshly starched clothes. He was late.

"I couldn't get away," he explained. He never talks much about his family, just saying once, "They're really sick about the Marines. But they don't know me very well." They must see the recklessness; they don't know about the drugs. They don't know about me.

Lightning stabbed the black, ragged hills. Like crooked spears, I thought, counting under my breath till the thunder came: "One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three, one thousand four, one thousand five, one—" It was striking more than a mile away.

What god was the god of war and thunder both? Thor? I stole a look at the Norseman beside me, and my thoughts came full circle and stopped. The car went faster; the night hurtled past us. It was a dark and barbaric mob running in the opposite direction, and if we had slowed it would have killed us, but we did not stop at all, and we were safe. The headlights were slicing us a path, since clouds had blanked out all the stars. But when we came down into the electric city, I was sorry, for it looked very tame and sullen; its air was immobile. We parked on a rundown street where the small silent houses were only intermittently lighted. David knocked on a door, and after a moment, a man's accented voice called, "I come! I come!" Uneven footsteps hurried toward us, and the screen door banged open.

"Hello, Hans," said David.

"Ah, David, how are you now? Come in," said the voice, a little breathlessly.

David walked through the door, ducking slightly, for it was low, and I followed. The room was a shop, dimly lighted and crammed with stringed musical instruments in various stages of being repaired. Cellos and basses leaned drunkenly against the walls; violins and violas dangled from racks or had been laid out for inspection upon pieces of green velvet, like elegant corpses. I breathed in the odors of resin and glue and looked at Hans, who was a little man, as soft and grey as the dust-fluffs on the floor. David did not introduce us.

"So. How is the guitar?" Hans asked, rubbing his hands slowly up and down on his apron.

"Fine," said David. "The mahogany is beautiful, but now I need ebony for the neck. And can you turn the pegs for me? I can't carve them well enough."

"Sure. Sure." His voice was very gentle, part of the shadows. "And the ebony—well, you come and you see what I have. It's in the back room."

We passed through another door and into a storeroom. David rummaged quickly through the piled wood, choosing the pieces he needed; Hans and I stood by and did not talk.

Hans would not take money for the ebony. "No—you pay when everything is done, all right?" So David stuffed his money back in his pocket and grinned at the little man. "Thanks, Hans," he said.

"It is all right," Hans repeated, and a smile tinged his grey features, too. "And now. Can I give you something—something to drink? And the young lady," he said, turning.

"What do you have?" asked David.

"I shall see," said Hans. He disappeared and we heard clinkings and bangings. "Only gin, " he announced. "I am sorry."

"That's fine," said David.

We sat in Hans' cluttered kitchen while David mixed his own gin and water; he gave me one sip, which was so strong that it singed my

throat. Hans stared at a point on the wall directly over my head; he and I did not drink. The speckled lightbulb over the kitchen table seemed to sway slightly, but there was no breeze at all. After two drinks we left. Hans did not get up.

"Goodbye, David," he said.

Outside, the night was feverish. David and I stood together on the sidewalk, and the moment lengthened into a pause. Then he laid the lovely ebony on the seat of the car, and said, "Let's go for a walk. There's time."

It was Friday night, and I knew that no one at my house would come home until eleven, so I agreed. And then, for the first time, he laid his arm around my shoulders to steer me up the street, and I slipped my arm around his waist, and we walked together, with our bare feet making soft flapping noises against the concrete of the sidewalk, which was still flesh-warm from the heat of the day. We moved unevenly, somehow; David was a little drunk. And so was I. His body felt firm and slender as a young tree, but one with roots blown loose in the earth, so tall and swaying against my body. We went to the end of the street and stopped in front of a tiny shabby house where no one lived; David stared at one of the cracked windows and pointed to a sign propped up in the corner.

"My sister drew that," he said.

It was hand-lettered, in an eccentric and unbeautiful way. It said, "For Rent. Inquire Within."

"She and her husband used to live here," he said thoughtfully. "They're in Mexico now, I guess—living on mushrooms and birth control pills." He laughed.

We drove home too fast, but I was no longer exhilarated by speed and darkness, and I wondered what my mother was going to say. But when we got home the house was still empty, and I was glad. I got out of the car. David followed.

"Can I come in?" he asked. I hesitated.

"Please let me come in," he said. "I don't want to drive home like this. Will you make me some tea?"

I took a breath to say No and and said Yes. We went into the house, where the smells of family supper still hung, and I brewed strong black tea for him and found some cookies. He folded himself onto a couch, eating hungrily, drinking three cups of tea, saying outrageous things. Laughter flared between us, and I forgot to be afraid; for once, David's mirage eyes did not seem so distant. "This is a nice place. I feel comfortable here," he said, with his mouth half full. "I tell you what, when I get out of the Marines, I'm going to go to Columbia University, and you can make me cookies." And when he left, before my family arrived, we were still laughing. And the noise of thunder came closer and more continuously as David slammed the car door and rumbled away. There was one tremendous thunderclap.

"It's going to rain!" I said, ears ringing, and then at last the first drops began to fall.

The storm seemed to have held its peace for so long only to gather strength for a great attack, because all through that night it roared around the house. Rain sheeted off the eaves and rippled the glass of my window, so that every time lightning snatched the darkness back, I caught glimpses of a strange and wavering world outside. I lay awake—storms enthrall me. But presently the wind began to change its tune, and it was a woman's keening, keening fiercer than all the brutality of the storm. It was more than I could bear; I felt for the radio switch and tuned another voice out of the darkness:

Well you know that it would be untrue
You know that I would be a liar
If i was to go and tell you,
"Girl, we couldn't get much higher—"*

I lay in bed, listening. It was a very sad song.

Come on, baby, light my fire.
Come on, baby, light my fire.
Try to set the night on—fire.

"José Feliciano with 'Light My Fire,' one of the number-one songs for summer, 1968. Too much, man! And it's twelve fifty-nine on a rainy night in the city and time for KTKT radio news." The announcer put on his serious voice: "Three teenagers were killed tonight in a two-car crash at the intersection of Campbell Avenue and River Road. Dead are John Swain, nineteen; Kathy Cywinsky, nineteen; and David Anderson, eighteen. Apparently Swain and Anderson—"

My heart jerked and began to beat very heavily; I felt as though the contractions were explosions that carried to each separate cell of my body. The announcer, who had never really paused, went on. "—were the drivers of the vehicles. Police blamed the accident on the storm. No further details—"

I pushed the switch and lay there paralyzed between the pillow and the sheets, just feeling my blood crawl through my veins. There was nothing I could do; I think I slept. For, sooner than I would have though, morning came, and midday, and afternoon, and twilight, and there was nothing I could do. The words of last night's song revolved dully in my head until I wanted to cry out.

The time for hesitation's through,
No time to wallow in the mire.
Try now, we could only lose,
We could only lose,
We could only lose.

After supper the telephone rang, and my mother answered it. Then she handed me the receiver. "For you," she said. I took it.

"Hello?" said the voice at the other end. I caught my breath: it was David.

"It wasn't you!" I said, clutching the receiver very hard in joy. I had forgotten what a common name he had.

"No," he told me. "But people have been asking me if I were dead all day. It's funny."

"Yes, I guess so," I said, and smiled.

"I'm going to be really busy finishing the guitar now that I've got the ebony, because there's not much time. So I don't know when I'll come by again." Then he said something about corruption that I didn't quite understand. "I have to do some other things before I go. I can't take anything with me, and people keep giving me stuff. Three Bibles! God!"

I was laughing.

"Mary?"

"David?"

"Nothing. I'll see you."

"All right," I said. I replaced the receiver on its cradle.

And he comes, but not very often now. And the days go by. And sometimes I go alone for walks in the desert just before sunset, and I lean against a tree and think. I wonder how much older I am getting. Does it matter? I caress David's pan-pipes between my fingers, but I cannot blow a note; he is going Viking, and I might be thinking battle cries, but there are other words moving in my mind. The world I see has color enough to make me drunk—and where he is going there is only green, twisting, choking, exploding with primeval and now the war's cruelty, and the only respite from the green will be, because he cannot change his course, David's golden silver hair and his scarlet blood. He does not love me. It does not matter. I will be happy, in the darkness and the light, and still I will be mourning him a little, always.